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Children of the Desert.

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PRESENTED BY
PROF. CHARLES A. KOFOID AND
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CHILDREN OF THE DESERT.

BY

MARION F. SMITHES.

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

BY

W. H. EDGAR.

CURTIS & DAVISON,
11A, CHURCH STREET, KENSINGTON.

1910.

To my Nephews and Nieces.

DS215
S6

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COVENTRY AND SON,
PRINTERS,
SOUTH NORWOOD, S.E.

"Amor."

Children of the Desert.

I.

The Gate of the Desert.

Will you come with me to the Gate of the Desert, that Great Sahara, the largest desert in the world.

To get there you must cross the sea, land at Algiers, the white town of the pirates, and travel two days through the mountains of North Africa, —part of the great Atlas range that "holds up the sky." Sometimes these are covered with snow, and if you are there in January, you may see a wonderful red sunset over the white mountains.

From huddled farms and villages come gleams of bonfires, for even in Africa, the children make snow-men and play round them, and as the train labours on you will see your first camel in its native land. It comes out of the glow of the sunset, padding softly along through the snow and casting a long shadow before it, its head waving patiently from side to side, a large pack fastened on to its hump, and the Arab driver walking behind.

That night you sleep at a little mountain inn by the railway station, and Margot, the strong French peasant girl, will bring you a steaming supper of wild boar and rice. Presently, perhaps, a burly French farmer comes in and joins the guests at the long table; he does not forget to take off his great white goatskin coat, wash his hands and bow politely before he sits down as near to the stove as possible.

The French have conquered this part of Africa, and farmsteads and railroads came with their wise rule.

The next morning you pass lovely lakes with flocks of big white birds; they are storks, but the train is going faster now, and will not stop half long enough for you to see them, nor the reflection of the mountains in the biggest lake: you just catch a glimpse of beautiful water pictures and are whirled on. Now the snow is melting fast, the earth begins to show through, and it is a strange buff colour, with low scrubby bushes here and there. The mountains are steep, and seamed with deep furrows.

The train rushes into a narrow gorge, it seems as if you could touch its rocky sides! There is a river far below, and the mountains almost close in front. You see a narrow cutting in the rock, the train stops, it is El Kantara,—the Gate of the Desert. . . .

A few more minutes and you will be inside, free to wander where you choose in the Great Sahara,

but beware of its dangers, of its fierce dry heat by day, and burning winds that come as if from a heated furnace, of its cold starlit nights, but chiefly beware of the wild nomad tribes, who still prey upon caravans and unprotected travellers.

Here the Desert greets you kindly, and offers you first one of its beautiful jewels—an oasis of palm trees,—a lovely cluster of feathery date palms set in a background of desert sand. The song of the river fills your ears as it rushes from the gorge, and on its banks are three villages. They are called the Red, the White and the Black Villages, from the different shades of soil and rock, and from the tribes that people them. In the White Village lives

AMOR, THE GUIDE.

Amor will meet you at the little station in the gorge, and if I tell you what he is like, you will be able to single him out from the crowd of white-robed Arabs. They all gather round, eager to sell you fruit, funny little sandstone fossils, or bits of the Salt Mountain near by. Amor will most likely have a basket of oranges; he is nineteen and very tall and straight with brown face and hands. He wears his old white woollen cloak (Burnous) with dignity, and beneath that is another white garment called a "gandora," with wide sleeves; this reaches below the knees, and he has yellow leather shoes, or "babouches" and brown socks. On his head is a white turban which is very becoming to his straight features, and it keeps the wind and

sun off the back of his head and neck. Amor is very gentle and strong, and will be ready to act as your guide, friend, or companion whenever you want him; if you look over the broad verandah of the inn in the early morning, you will see him sitting under the trees in the courtyard below waiting for you, ready to take you on the mountain paths, or to show you through the villages. He will be proud to lead you to the best cafe in the White Village, where you can sit at a little table near the door and drink strong Arab coffee out of gold and white china cups, or weak tea from a glass.

Then there will be a visit to his mother; she is very poor and their home consists of a mud-coloured enclosure, or yard, with two or three poor rooms off it, without windows or chimney. The mother is a handsome woman with great mournful eyes. Her robe of crimson rags is caught on her shoulders by silver pins, and a silver bangle or two jingle on her bare arms. Over her thick plaited black hair she wears a graceful turban wound round in folds and hanging down at the back. She works a small stone mill to grind corn for making *cous-cous* — the family dinner. Cous-cous is a sort of dry porridge mingled with oil, or butter, and sugar, and sometimes little shreds of meat. She will let you work the mill, kneeling beside it on the earthen floor, and you will soon see how hard it is to keep on moving the flat stones with a wooden handle. Amor will

then take you across the stepping stones (if the river is not too full) to the Red Village on the opposite hill. If you go there in April you will see such a wonderful sight of almond and apricot trees in blossom as you will never forget all your life! There is a winding path up from the river, just a rocky way for foot passengers and donkeys, and when the orchards are in bloom it is a bower of pink and white blossom.

The Red Village is very picturesque, perched on its crag of red rocks, but you wonder how it can be safe to live in such tumble down old houses. The Arabs sit on the ground outside their doors wrapped in white cloaks, and pass hours musing or sleeping, while groups of children, the boys mostly in white and the girls in gay coloured garments with babies on their backs, flit about the streets.

Amor will tell you what good times he and the other boys used to have in the summer time when the schools are closed. They spent the happy, hot hours wading and swimming in the river or resting under the oleander bushes with the lovely pink flowers. At night they slept in the palm gardens, because it was too hot to remain within the sun-baked walls of their homes. Then the heads of the family made a shelter with branches on the flat roofs, like a little arbour, for the women and children to sleep in.

Amor and his friend L'Aggra spent as much time as they could together, when their fathers

did not send them off to the mountains to tend the goats. One night they were asleep in the garden under the brilliant star-light, when Amor felt something cold touch his arm, which was stretched over his head. Starting up he saw a great serpent coiled round just above him. He woke L'Aggra, and they fetched sticks and stones and tried to kill the serpent, but it made for the wall. Then Amor's father came with a torch and burnt it in its hole.

There are few dangers in these sunny villages, only beware of the prickly pear that leaves invisible thorns in unguarded hands. To bathe and dive in the river among the oleander bushes with their rosy flowers,—to run wild on the mountains after the gazelle and Barbary sheep—these are the activities of an El Kantara boy's life, for the rest of the time he just lies for hours on the ground and dreams, or plays with dice and dominoes, or a curious game with stones in little hollows of the sand,—like a chessboard. Cards are forbidden by the French Government, but alas, Amor is a born gambler, he dreams of winning large fortunes and ends by losing all he has gained from the *Roumis* (Christian strangers). Once he even burnt a mark on the back of his hand with a lighted match so that he might be reminded by the scar when he put out his hand to play, but the temptation came again, and one day he was caught by the police and fined a considerable sum. Now his father was poor and could

not help, and Amor was in danger of being sent to prison. It was lucky for him that just then a Roumi came to El Kantara and offered to take the boy with him for a shooting expedition in the mountains. The long hard days on mule back or climbing the Salt Mountain, the excitement of seeing a herd of gazelle and stalking the great horned Barbary sheep, which always chose the steepest, roughest crags, the care of the tents, the gathering round the fire and keeping watch by turns with the huntsmen through the night, swept the cobwebs of the past from Amor's brain. He grew harder and wiser, and during that time he gained more than enough money to pay the fine. He was sent down to Biskra with a fine gazelle shot by the English Roumi; the same benefactor found work for him there, and when he returned to his native village the storm had blown over and Amor was safe once more.

II.

The Sisters (Ayesha and Amina).

The first time I saw the sisters they were peeping shyly out of a great doorway in one of the villages that cluster round Biskra (the Queen of Villages).

It was an important looking door and evidently led to one of the larger houses of the place. They slipped out and leant against the sunlit wall, a graceful little pair about twelve or thirteen years old. Their slender limbs, large, deep shining eyes, the clear creamy bronze of their skin, no less than the finely-wrought earrings and bracelets, marked them out as children of some Arab chief. When they saw that I lingered behind my friends and looked towards them, they withdrew into their big doorway, but later on when I was sitting on a low bank in a neighbouring palm garden, they drew near and stood on the outside of a group of village children. Presently they came quite close and showed me their quaint jewellery, the lucky Fathma's hand in worked gold or brass that all Arab maidens wear, the heavy earrings crescent-shaped and quite three to four inches across and the silver bangles on their slender wrists.

I wish I could describe to you the grace of these

"Arab Girls."

two, the sweet shyness of their movements, the gentle dignity of their bearing.

Whenever I passed through that village they were always together and kept away from the noisy chattering children. This is their story as I came to know it by degrees.

Their father was a proud and passionate chief, who lived in an oasis village called Chetma some miles across the desert. He had a beautiful wife, of whom he was very fond, but after some years he tired of her and began to complain that she had only given him two daughters when he wished for a son. The wife was proud, too, and very reserved, so for a long time she made no answer to his reproofs. At last she could bear it silently no longer and one day she stood up and faced him as no Arab woman is supposed to do (for she may not raise her eyes to her husband's face, nor eat until he has finished, nor come near him unless called for). Now her spirit rose up to meet his, and fiery words poured from her lips. . . . That she should dare to speak as an equal with her flashing eyes on his, made the Chief mad with rage; the veins on his forehead swelled, he seized her by her slender neck and strangled the voice that defied him until she died!

The Cäid could not bear to see his children after that and they wandered about like two forlorn little ghosts, trying to get out of their father's way. Accustomed to being petted and played with, they now drooped like flowers without

any water, the neighbours talked and looked on, as the way of the world is.

One day an elderly Arab came to visit the unhappy household. He was a venerable looking man, an uncle of the Cäid's and lived in another oasis village. A rumour having reached him of the state of things in his nephew's household and that he was about to buy another wife, the old man now offered to take the little girls to his own home, for he and his wife had no children. The Cäid was much relieved at this, for his conscience pricked him whenever he saw their pale, piteous faces, and he let them go at once. The uncle was charmed with his little charges; he lifted them on to a kneeling camel and took them away that very day. Ayesha and Amina clung to each other and to the sides of the queer cage in which they were travelling. It was a very large basket, shaped like the half of an egg and covered in with red and blue curtains. Never in their short lives had they been on a camel before, and the long swinging stride and half twilight in which they sat, filled them with awe. Now and then they peeped out between the curtains and saw that the uncle was riding a mule and heard the servants coming behind, while a man urged on their camel with a long stick. For about two hours they crossed the desert, then the stony bed of a river, and came at last to their new home behind the big door where I first saw them. The old wife greeted them kindly and showed them the alcove room leading

out of the centre hall where they were to sleep. The little girls lived happily with the old couple. The days were spent playing in the palm gardens, and for the first year or two they were allowed to wander about the village with the other children. What fun it was to watch the boys running up the rough stems of the palm trees like monkeys while the village girls stood below, each carrying a plump baby brother or sister on her long-suffering back and watching for a stray date from above. What dances they had at the Date Harvest time, when the wind blew the autumn leaves about. It was the prettiest sight to see the leaf-dance in a corner of some village street, the wind sporting with the leaves and twirling them in the air and the little Arabs imitating them !

When the Spring came round again, the old couple began to talk of marriage. The girls must not be allowed to run wild any longer, it was time they learned to plait their long dark hair with ropes of coloured wool, and the neighbouring grandmothers must be consulted as to suitable husbands.

The sisters were very sad when they heard this. Marriage would mean that they must part from each other and they would be at the mercy of some strange and perhaps terrible man.

At the next full moon there was to be a wedding in Old Biskra and the children were invited to go with their aunt. They were dressed in charming robes of soft light stuff with bunches of tiny roses over it ; their hair was plaited and coiled

round their small heads while some braids fell in graceful loops behind their ears. Strings of gold coins hung on their foreheads and from their necks rows of beads. Over each head were two veils, one soft rose, the other pale blue gauze, covered with silver stars that glittered as they moved. On their bare arms and even round their slender ankles shone many bangles.

When the guests reached the bride's house in the afternoon they undid the white wrappers which all better class Arab women have to wear when they go out. These cover them entirely except for a tiny opening for one eye and another for their slippered feet to peep through. The bride's mother was very busy making a huge bowl of special cous-cous in the centre hall which was half open to the air. A stream of water ran along the ground and this was used from time to time, either for cooking, or for washing the dusty feet of the guests. A fire was kindled in a sort of brazier on the earthen floor and the smoke filled the hall. Coffee was now made, very strong and sweet and served in little gold and white cups. Afterwards the small son of the house, the only "man" present, led them, with much dignity, up a stairway in the wall to the flat roof of the house; as they went they saw more groups of women in the garden below, also making cous-cous and coffee. Their gay colours shone in the sun like the plumage of tropical birds among the green trees. The bride was crouching in a corner of the house-

top with a dark mantle over her. She looked like a pale Cinderella, very shy and pretty.

Soon the younger women began to plait and comb her hair and twist it up with coloured wool, others fetched her dresses and veils, and more and more guests came and gathered round her singing a kind of high-pitched chant with now and again a high quaver in it,—the marriage song of the Arabs. She hardly lifted her head at all, but sat with her face hidden in her knees except when they gently encouraged her to move and be dressed. Her hands were stained with the crimson henna plant and all the beautiful garments and jewellery, provided by the bridegroom, were brought out for her to choose from, until the pale Cinderella was changed into a gorgeous butterfly, but no less shy and downcast than before.

Meanwhile the white-robed young men awaited her coming in the palm garden of the bridegroom, and here he sat on the ground in the moonlight with his friends around him. The stars were like diamond-dust and the hours passed slowly while he waited for her.

In the bridegroom's house there was another brightly robed and jewelled crowd of women; it was dark now and only a few dim lights showed in the big hall, lighting up the glittering jewellery and sparkling veils of the guests and their bright soft eyes and white teeth. From time to time they raised the marriage chant with the high quaver in it, or else six women got up at a time

and danced a graceful and dignified measure while the others remained seated on the ground and clapped their hands in rhythm. Every now and then the head of the house came in and fired off a huge horse pistol over the heads of the women who set up their tremulous wail at the terrific noise and smoke! This was to assert his authority and having done it he returned to the palm garden. All the children were there, from babies in arms to boys of twelve, and many of them fell asleep before the bride was carried into the house in her box raised high on men's shoulders, and it was past eleven o'clock before the wedding ceremonies were over.

The sisters hardly slept that night, they were so tired and excited, but next morning they still prayed their aunt not to find them husbands, as they could not bear to part from each other. Here was a pretty pass, for all nice Arab maidens must marry, so the old couple scolded and coaxed while the girls only clung to each other and drooped their heads under the storm of words.

At last the distracted elders ceased and said to each other, "Let us wait and see: they come of a proud race, and if we force them it will only drive them wild. Perhaps love will conquer where nothing else will."

One day a grandmother came to seek wives for her two heirs. "They are fine young men," she said, "and have saved money, and now I am growing old and feeble and need help in the house."

"Bid the young men come here," said the uncle with a knowing twinkle in his eye. "I have some Degler Nord dates in my garden; let them come and judge if they are fine enough for me to send as a present to our chief the *Bachagar* and at the same time *I* will judge of them."

"It shall be as you say," answered the grandmother, and the next day the young men came. Now it is not the custom for young Arab women to be seen by strange men, so the sisters were sent to the top of the house when the visitors arrived. The elder of the two now girded his clothes about him and proceeded to climb the highest palm tree. When he got among the branches he found he was looking down on the roof of the house, and what should he see, but two sweet little maidens fast asleep upon the flat house top! In his surprise, he nearly slipped, but just had the presence of mind (some instinct telling him what to do) to take the rose placed behind his ear, after the manner of young Arabs, and fling it gently on to the sleeping maidens. It touched the arm of the elder one and she looked up just in time to see him disappearing down the tree stem.

"Your dates are indeed worthy to be placed on the Bachagar's table," said the youth, "and if you desire it my brother and I will return to-morrow with baskets, and ourselves gather the bunches for you." The uncle was pleased with their appearance and manners, and the next day both brothers climbed the date palm. This time the maidens

were wide awake and though they stayed shyly in the furthest corner of the house top, still, they did not run away, but watched the nimble young men among the branches. No words were spoken, but a little shower of the finest dates dropped on to the flat roof at their feet. After that day, the uncle continually praised the young men and spoke of their well-cultivated garden with its strange new vegetables grown from seeds the Roumis had brought across the seas, its bower of roses, and the orange grove and fountain. Our maidens began to prick up their dainty ears and when the old couple went on to speak of the rich clothes and jewels they would give their future wives, the sisters said eagerly, "Will they let us live in the same house if we marry them some day?" "Yes, indeed," was the answer, "for they are friends as well as brothers: they share the same house and work the garden together." After that no more objections were heard and through the winter months the sisters learned to make soups and cous-cous and to weave coverlids and carpets. They grew taller and more beautiful each day; their eyes shone with a new light and the soft rose colour came and went in their cheeks.

Meanwhile the brothers worked on in their garden, and the spring and the full moon time drew near.

"Friends."

III.

Saïd, the Blind Boy.

Saïd is blind: gradually the mists fell over his eyes; things became less clear until they lost their outline, and now he cannot even distinguish a dim light when he looks up at the great sun,—the *Chems*. If you pass a hand before his eyes, he cannot see it at all! He feels his way along the village street, one hand after another touching the rough walls, his pale, wistful face turned up as if to listen, and his poor eyes with the white films drawn over them. With clever bare feet he creeps along, every part of him feeling or listening; though he belongs to one of the better families of old Biskra, yet it is the custom for boys to go barefoot. He is dressed all in white, and his woollen cloak has a peaked hood, which is pulled over his head.

It is just a stone's throw from the door of his home to his father's palm garden by the Mosque, and Zahira, the tiny sister, with the great brown eyes shaped like almonds, and quaint silver bracelets hanging from her baby wrists, guides Saïd across the narrow street to the low garden door next to the white Mosque. Once inside the garden he knows most of the trees and bushes, and feels

with his bare toes for the water channels that run through the dry earth. He tells the roses by their perfume and their thorns, and these and the scarlet geranium and orange-blossom are almost the only flowers that grow there. There are a few vegetables under the great palm trees, and the garden is full of tiny twittering goldfinches and tom-tits.

It is a red-letter day for Saïd when his big brother Bachir brings home the news that the Roumi is coming to visit the family. A little way along the street you see a tunnel: it is a house that has been built over the road, and here Saïd sits in the shadow and listens for the footsteps of the Roumi. Arabs with velvet tread come softly by, but at last he hears his friend's firm step, and holds out his hand confidingly for the Arab greeting, kissing his own fingers as the custom of his people is. Sometimes a singing top or some other cunning toy is given him, and then the pinched mouth quivers with excitement, while the limp fingers feel along the ground after the gay little humming globe, so new and strange to him. Yes, these are bright days, especially when the Roumi stays in the palm garden and tells him about strange things in the great world beyond the mountains, of machines that fly with wings, like birds, and of great battle ships as big as a whole village! But when the Roumi has gone back to his own country there are many days when Saïd feels lonely. There is so little he can do but listen and

think. . . . What does he hear as he stands with his eager patient face upturned? And what does he think about, all to himself? You may be sure his mind-pictures are clearer and brighter than ours, and he hears the "still small voices" that tell the hidden meaning of things, of the invisible spirits that are beyond and all around us, and his thoughts have wings that carry him far away.

When his mother is busy with the cooking in the rambling old house with mud-coloured walls, Saïd stands near and helps her when he can with his soft-fingered Arab hands, or he follows her to the inner hall with its one window in the flat roof, and to the bedrooms leading out of it; these are just dark alcoves without any windows at all! Then they take the keys and inspect the date store-rooms, the nicest of which is on the flat roof of the house. Here again are no windows, but the air comes through narrow slits in the walls and there is light enough to see the rows of golden brown dates hung in neat bunches all round. They look so tempting hanging by their dry yellow stalks, and Saïd's mother will give her Roumi friends great handfuls of the delicious fruit. These dates are not dark and sticky as they come to us in boxes, but firm and golden from the dry air and the filtered sunlight. The store-rooms are filled in the autumn when the clusters are gathered from the date palms, and they have to last a whole year as food for the family, eked out with a little corn, and milk from the goats.

Saïd is free to wander where he likes, for the Arabs are kind to the blind, and if they see them in any difficulty they will take them by the hand and lead them gently on their way. His favourite walk is down the village street with its cool stream of running water, and past the white Mosque. He likes to linger here for though he cannot see the Arabs praying on the grass mats in the cool downstairs chamber, with the white pillars and the niche to the East, he listens to the sleepy drone of the small boys who are being taught to repeat bits of the Koran by heart. They are shut up in the little stuffy chamber or out on the roof of the Mosque, and he can hear the master's voice chiding and correcting as the little fellows bring up their white boards with the queer Arab letters on them. He can picture them all seated on the floor round the master, and half asleep in the hot noontide. Now he knows it is two o'clock, for some men have mounted the steps to the tower, and they stop by an open space, close to the top, and send out the daily cry to the Faithful. Over the roofs of the houses it rings, first one man and then another taking it up—"*Allah Akbar*!" "Allah is great." All the village hears the cry, and the weird high-pitched voices pierce the still air. Over the fields and palm gardens it sounds:—"Come, for Allah invites you to prayer."—*Allah Akbar!*

Saïd longs to go up the tower, and one day he glides into the dim Mosque behind his father; while he is praying, the boy creeps up the narrow

"Arab Boys' School."

stairway, feeling carefully by both walls. He has reached the place with the windows all round, where the men will presently stand and cry to the people, but he wants to go higher. . . . Rash Saïd ! He feels for the wooden ladder he has heard Bachir talk of, and climbs slowly up and up till he comes through an opening of the tower on to a small platform. He cannot see that there is no wall round it, that he is standing between earth and sky with nothing but a couple of feet between him and the unprotected edge of the tower. O, Saïd ! You little know how near Eternity you are, standing on the minaret of that White Mosque, wrapt in happy thoughts ! Sounds of life from the village far below come up to you, the great palm trees wave their heads, but they are not so high as you are ; the fine fresh breeze cools your excited brain, you seem to hear the music of the wonderful *Asrafil*, the singer of Paradise. . . . You leave the centre spire and move nearer the edge, there is but one step between you and the abyss—you are leaning over it now. . . Suddenly there rings out the call to prayer—high and mysterious, it makes the clear air tremble. Saïd starts violently backwards, but the men in the tower below have caught sight of his garment through the opening where the ladder is, and when the call is over, they mount up and lead him from the giddy height. "This is no ordinary boy," they say to each other, "did you notice the expression on his face ? He hears more than we do, let us have him

taught and trained, and perhaps he will be a poet and thinker one day." So Said is allowed to sit at the feet of wise men, and his mind is fed with many thoughts, and he is happy, because his spirit is free, and new paths open before him. He often comes up to the tower now, but he knows just where to stand, and never leaves go of the centre spiral of the Minaret. Here he listens to the music of the wonderful *Asrafil*, and his thoughts take wing and soar over the kingdoms of the world, far away across the fields of Asphodel, to the mountains of the moon.

"Combing Wool."

IV.

Fafa—The Frog-Girl.

Fafa came from among the tent Arabs or Bedouins. All her little life up to the age of six had been spent outside Biskra, where the tents dot the bare plain on the farther side of the river. The mountains of the Aures made a purple and gold background at sunset, and the glow lit up the brown camel-hair tents.

Each group of tents had a fierce white dog, and if any strangers came near, he sprang at them with wild hoarse barking, his rough coat standing quite on end. Then the Arabs would take up stones and fling them at the dog and only so could you get near to the tents. It was a rough life that the children led, huddled together through the cold starlit nights, thinking themselves lucky if they got a piece of the many coloured blanket or some rags to wrap round their half bare limbs.

When early morning broke, they crouched round the thorn fire, hoping for a drink of goat's milk, while the sun rose up warm and bright. Later, they crossed the dry and stony river bed to Biskra, the "Queen of Villages," where they were sent by their parents to beg for "*sordi*" (money) from the strangers in the streets and public gardens.

Lucky indeed were they if they took back some coins carefully tied up in a corner of their garments, and luckier still if they could get a meal of hot beans and soup from the Arabs, who sat by the little cooking stoves in front of the Casino, or in the market place. Sometimes the cooks would be in a generous mood, and give a handful of beans to the children for nothing, and let them sip the soup from big ladles. If there was no money to take back there would be sullen looks and even blows from disappointed parents. Then came the time for play, when Fafa and the other children would slip away to the crevasses by the river bank. Here they searched for the little brown "rose of the desert," the only flower that grows there, and they looked long and carefully in the dry and sun-baked earth before they could find it, for it is the same colour as the sand. Fafa loved to watch the frogs and imitate their queer hops and croaking till the other children grinned and clapped their hands while the odd little figure, clasping her hands under her knees, hopped about in weird rhythm. When they were tired of play, they wandered back to the tents where the smoke from the supper fires was going up, and after a handful or two of *cous-cous* they turned in for the night. The women were busy stirring the food in the big wooden bowls with their hands, and fetching bundles of dry thorns for the fires.

One day Fafa went across the stony river bed with her mother. They wore their oldest rags and

their bare arms and legs looked pitifully out from the tatters. Up and down the little streets they wandered, and if they saw a likely tourist looking in at the quaint and pretty Arab jewellery in a shop window, or at the richly coloured embroidery and carpets hanging outside, they would draw gently near, and hold out slim brown hands for "*sordi.*" Sometimes Fafa's elfin face and bright smile attracted their notice, and her clear deep brown eyes, shining white teeth and dimples softened their hearts. They looked from her to the silent, mournful mother with the sad, patient face, then slipped a coin into Fafa's chubby hand. But this day there was no such luck; it was near the end of the season, and the *Roumis* were mostly sitting in the shady gardens. Here Fafa and her mother could not stay long for the mouse-like "gardien" with the white whiskers and French uniform soon chased the beggars away. He was the terror of the women and girls, but the sport of the impish Arab boys who made fun of him behind his back and gave him the name of "Le Souris," the mouse. He carried a long stick and swished violently at the beggars if they loitered in the gardens.

"*Roh! Empshi!*" go away, were the only answers Fafa got that day, until one Roumi lady tickled the little palm with a Mimosa leaf as it was held up beside the garden bench, where she was sitting with her work. Discouraged, Fafa turned away with such piteous eyes that the lady got up

and took her to a pastry-cook's tempting shop and bought a crisp brown cake-bread and another for her mother.

As they went back to the tents that evening they said to each other that it would soon be time to move up to the mountains, for as May draws to a close the tents are packed up on camels, the little donkeys carry their loads too, the women and children are put into great hood-like cages on some of the steadier camels, and the caravan moves away to the north by the pass called the Col de Sfa. Sometimes they get work in the cornfields or forests beyond the mountains, and remain until the winter cold drives them back to the sunny Biskra plains.

Fafa threw herself down just outside the tent, the heat and long walk had made her too weary to think of her friends, the frogs, or of the other children, who were playing by the *seggia* (stream).

She put her head on her arm and went fast asleep, while the glow from the sunset lit up the rosy mountain towards the east, and the whole mountain range that forms a semi-circle to the north of Biskra shone with glorious colours. Crimson faded to orange, then purple and blue and opal while the great sun, the "Chems," went down in the west and the desert to the south showed against the clear pale sky of evening like a deep blue line of sea, stretching away to the heart of Africa.

A pious Arab stopped by the side of the desert

track, not far from the tents, took off his shoes, spread his cloak and began to pray towards the east, a dignified figure against the evening sky.

A fresh little wind got up and fanned into a crackling flame the bundle of dry thorns which a Bedouin of the tents had just thrown under his gipsy cauldron. He did not notice the sleeping child so dangerously near the fire. The playful wind blew the flames up higher, a spark flew out and caught Fafa's rags, spreading until it licked her bare arms. She sat up suddenly, felt the sudden sting of pain and fled shrieking towards the dry river bank. Oh! why did she not stop by the *seggia?* Her friends, the frogs, and the precious water would have saved her had she only known! She was wild now with fear and horror, the flames had reached her shoulders and her flight through the air only fanned them the more. She made for the slope, stumbled on a tuft of dry grass and rolled down the soft sand close to where the Arab stood praying, with his face to the east. He stared at the wild little figure, then moved swiftly after her with long strides, caught her up as she rolled to the foot of the bank and began shovelling the sand over her small body until she was buried up to her neck, and the flames went out. . . .

Poor Fafa was sadly scorched, and her people carried her to the White Sisters' Hospital that evening. She lay for many weeks in the long airy ward on the women's side, and gentle Soeur

Louise put soothing ointments on her injured limbs and gave her cool drinks to stop the fever.

Gradually the pain ceased, and she was able to watch the Sisters as they moved up and down in their long white woollen garments with starched coifs and a rosary hanging at their side. The sunlight flitted through the green Venetian shutters, and Fafa grew stronger and at last was able to walk a little and sit in the palm garden at the back of the Hospital with the women and children. Her people had gone to the mountains by this time, so the White Sisters thought of teaching her to embroider in their little school not far from the Hospital. Here, if you visit them, as we did, and pass through the carpet-making room where jolly little Arab maidens are weaving away at their looms and chattering like so many gay-coloured parrots, the Sisters will show you a court-yard, where a few poor women are busy combing and winding the white wool for the carpets, afterwards to be dyed with soft rich colours. Finally, you will be taken to a low room full of sunlight. Here a dozen tiny girls, babies almost some of them, sit on very low stools in groups, with embroidery frames on their knees, and bright-faced Soeur Louise with the kind blue eyes and rosy cheeks, teaches them to stitch quaint and pretty Arab patterns. Fafa had made a cushion of silk roses on a cream linen ground. Though only seven, her little fingers were so nimble and clever that we bought her piece of work, and then, when

all the baby hearts had been gladdened by the gift of coloured sweets and Soeur Louise had told us what a sweet gay nature Fafa's was, she signed to her to lead the Frog Dance, and soon all the mites were hopping about the floor with their hands clasped under their knees, to the music of Fafa's queer frog song. "We often let them play," said the Sister, "it does them good, and they work so much better afterwards. We hope Fafa will stay on with us now and earn more money by her embroidery than she did by begging in the streets and gardens."

V.

Zenobia,—the Camel.

One evening, just as the sun had gone down, and the glow was fading from the Rosy Mountain, a string of camels came towards Biskra from the Desert.

They were so weary that they sank down on the short grass by the roadway the moment the headman of the caravan gave the signal to rest, for they had come along the road from Touggourt which winds across the desert from the South to Biskra. The heavy packs were still upon their backs (bound on with grunts and groans as if the camels were begging their drivers not to overload them) but now they bent their legs when the camel-men touched their knees with sticks, and crouched down with long necks stretched out.

A fresh breeze from Beni Mora, the little oasis with the green palm trees and sweet-scented mimosa blossom refreshed their weary nostrils, for the camel's sense of smell is acute, it can close the narrow slits of its nose at will, and open them when the dust storms are over. Now they drank in the cool, clean air that blew over the fields of low green corn, where the quail love to feed.

Meanwhile, the Arabs in charge of the caravan

"The Méhari, or Racing Camel."

went on into Biskra to make arrangements about selling the loads of dates, or for sending them beyond the mountains by the iron road. It grew dusk while the camels rested, all huddled together in a clump guarded by one Arab. Presently, a merchant returned with the other Arabs and bargained for the loads of dates. As he still haggled over the price, the head of the caravan at last offered him one of the camels. "I will choose that one," said the merchant pointing to the head of a white camel with large dark eyes and a mournful expression. The headman complained that it was his best camel, but at last gave in, and with many grunts and groans the tired animals were made to stand up and continue their way for a few hundred yards till they came to the *fondouk* (square enclosure) where they were to rest for the night.

Then the dusk fell quickly while more strings of camels came in wearily from the desert, and sank down with nostrils distended towards Beni Mora and the green grass. It was too late now for the merchants to bargain over their loads, so they slept there with the packs on their patient backs,—just clumps of crouching camels with the Arabs watching silently beside them.

When morning came, there was another little camel in the *fondouk* and the big white mother was proudly licking her baby. The merchant was pleased with his bargain, but the driver was annoyed that the finest camel had been chosen,

and he went away lamenting taking the others with him. The little camel grew strong and held up its head like a swan, looking out proudly on the world. For a few years it trotted beside its mother and did no work. It loved to stretch its long legs and lie quite flat on its side in the sun. Its head was trimmed with ropes and fringes of red and white wool, and people admired the funny little creature.

A camel is not full grown until it is about sixteen years old, but its training begins before that. One day the driver of the caravan returned bringing his son with him, a boy of twelve years. He was of a dark bronze colour as the Tibbus or camel people are; very erect and graceful with curly hair, big eyes and strong white teeth.

When the merchant saw him, he asked the father to leave the boy in Biskra so that he might train the young camel which was getting rather troublesome. He promised to feed the boy well, and make him a carrier of the mails over the desert, should he succeed in training the camel. The father consented, and Dachmed remained in Biskra.

The mother camel was now leading an easy life, and bringing in plenty of money, for she stood or crouched daily under the palm trees by the casino, and was hired for short rides by the Roumi ladies.

Dachmed called the young one Zenobia, after the Queen of the Arabian Desert, and he began to try and make friends with her. Unfortunately,

she was getting a bad name for kicking and biting, the result of rough treatment. Dachmed began by approaching her gently but the work of years could not be undone in a few days, and at times he despaired of ever making the camel trust him.

One day he was feeling rather irritated, because the other boys jeered at his efforts and said he would do far better to conquer the camel by force, when Zenobia suddenly gave a nasty nip at his arm. At this Dachmed lost patience and raising his stick, gave her a sharp cut on the head. For two heart-beats the noble animal stood perfectly still, then reared up in the air and came down on the hapless boy, literally trampling him under foot in her agony and fury! The Arabs looked on in dismay, but soon several of them rushed forward, beat off the revengeful animal with their sharp-pointed sticks, and pulled a bruised heap of white clothing from the dust. Quite unconscious, Dachmed was carried high on the men's shoulders in an open wooden coffin to the White Sisters' Hospital. They thought at first he was dead, but were willing to try what the Sisters' skill could do for him. They washed the dust away and straightened the crumpled limbs very gently but firmly. By degrees he returned to consciousness and to the dull ache of his bruises, but when these grew better he was able to enjoy the long cool chamber with green sun shutters. He looked forward to the pale Sisters' visits as they went softly from one white bed to another, speaking cheery words in

French to some, and Arabic to others. Friends came and sat silently by the sufferers' bedsides, but as Dachmed had no one to visit him, one pale sister stayed a little longer by him and he told her how he came to be there, and that his ambition had been to tame the wild young camel. In return she told him how she had spent her young days on a farm in far-away France, and how she had watched the training of fiery horses and other animals. "You will only win a high-spirited animal by endless patience and kindness," she said. "Get it to trust you by slow degrees, learn to know its habits and nature, make its life of service a mutual benefit to master and animal, and you will be sure to succeed." Dachmed thought over the sister's words, and through the long weeks when he was slowly regaining the use of his limbs, he resolved to try again. His strength came back to him with the wholesome convent food. For a time he worked for the White Sisters in their palm gardens and corn fields, until his muscles grew stronger than ever before, and then he bade them a grateful farewell and went back to Biskra.

He found that Zenobia had been removed to a solitary enclosure and her fore-leg tied up with strong cord, to prevent her from kicking or running away. Her great eyes were dull and sullen with weariness and helpless rage, and Dachmed felt his heart-strings tighten with pity at the sight of her misery. She was half-starved too, and her coat was all rough and dirty.

The first thing he did, was to give her his own dinner which consisted of some fresh milk from the convent dairy into which he broke pieces of white bread,—a delicacy he did not often get. The camel swallowed them eagerly, and meanwhile Dachmed bent down and cut the cord that bound her leg backwards, just above the knee joint, until it formed a V. It was so stiff and swollen that she could hardly stand on it, but she turned her large eyes on Dachmed and he saw they were full of tears! Day after day he fed and tended her, often sharing his own food with the camel. He worked hard, too, carrying goods for the traders in the market-place and so earning enough to keep them both. He slept in the yard close to her enclosure, and combed and brushed her coat daily, until she looked the well-bred fine-limbed camel she was. He was quite proud of her and began to lead her about on a cord and teach her to kneel at the word of command and a gentle touch on her knee. Zenobia was quite tame now, and she even lowered her swan-like neck, and rubbed her head gently against his arm!

The merchant heard of Dachmed's success, and offered to get him the post of mail-carrier to the desert towns away to the south, so Dachmed and Zenobia travelled far and fast. When the wild desert winds whistled in their ears, and the sand-storms arose suddenly, Dachmed would slide off her back and make her crouch on the ground, while he sheltered behind her body; she would

close her nostrils until they were just narrow slits, and when the storm was over they rose up and went on again, "the broad elastic pads of her feet moving swiftly over the shifting sand." Dachmed learnt to watch the camel's hump and if it was well distended it meant there was a sufficient reserve of fat for a long journey, while a good store of water in her stomach lasted for several days. Zenobia often carried him 100 miles a day far away to the south, where the soil is like fire and the wind like flame, and where eggs can be baked in the hot sand! Both of them grew hardy and strong, for they returned safely through the best date country and lived on the bread of the desert and the sap of the tree-palm.

After two years of this life, Dachmed entered for the great camel race from Touggourt to Biskra, 220 kilometres across the desert. Half way, they might rest for an hour or two in the night, but the Queen of Villages must be reached fairly early the next morning. It was the month of April, when twelve fine Méharis or racing camels left Touggourt, and a lovely morning when the crowd waited for them on the edge of the desert beyond Cora,—the last oasis of the cluster. The air was keen and sparkling, and so clear, that a little "mirage" showed on the horizon like a tempting miniature village set in a lake of blue water with tufts of palm trees dotted about. Suddenly the Méharis came in sight,—strange figures against the background of sand and sky!

On they came at a quick trot, a tall, slim, white camel, and a brown one close together, then the others one by one. The riders were all thin, dark men, clad in white garments, with red sashes round their bodies. They were perched high on peaked saddles, and their crossed feet tapped the ridge of the camels' necks to encourage them. They waved their arms and urged on their steeds with pointed sticks and weird short cries!

Now the two first camels have separated. Dachmed on Zenobia has chosen the outside of the waiting crowd, while the brown one goes between the lines of people. Dachmed has chosen wisely, for though it is a little further and there is a deep ditch to cross, it is less distracting for his camel. He slides to the ground as Zenobia slackens her pace waving her head nervously from side to side at the cries of "*Saheit*," "Well done!" from the onlookers; he runs beside her for a few hundred yards, then, at the tiniest touch down she kneels, and up he springs, one foot on her neck, and on they go at a swinging pace towards the winning flag! The brown camel hesitates, and stops, put off by the crowd, and his mahogany-coloured rider has to get off and pull him along, losing a few seconds in this way. Still it is a good race, and he is only a few yards behind, when Zenobia strides calmly past the flag,—first of all the Méharis!

VI.

Deb, the Donkey.

Two children were crouching under a palm tree one warm evening as the shadows grew long. Their father's tent was pitched close to the desert, not far from where the palms end and the low corn fields melt into desert sand. The boy had been driving a few goats slowly along under the trees and playing his reed flute, when his small sister beckoned to him to come and talk to her. Now Hadj was very fond of little Fatma and when he saw her tear-stained face and loosened head-gear, he let her draw him down by the stem of the old palm tree and listened to her tale of woe.

That afternoon she had been sent to the negro village on the outskirts of Biskra with some plates of plaited alpha grass, for these sell very well in the market place for fruit dishes when they are made in bright colours and stained green or crimson with henna and other vegetable dyes. She was coming back across the dry and stony river-bed with some dates in exchange for the plates, when a wild-looking old Arab came towards her along the road from Sidi Okba. She tried to slip past him unnoticed but he threw back his head,

"Deb," the Donkey.

looked at her from under his drooping eyelids, seized the bundle of dates which she was clasping to her breast and hurried on! She did not notice until a little while after that he had at the same time carried off the brass Fatma's hand, which hung from her neck by a chain of rough coral and other beads. When she got back to the tent her mother would not believe the story, and scolded poor Fatma for playing with the rough children of the negro village and so losing the lucky hand. Now this pendant was an old and valued one and she knew that her father, who was cutting strips of goatskin into leather thongs and watching the quail rise from their evening meal on the low cornfield, would be angry and perhaps beat her when he heard of the loss. So she wept bitterly while she told Hadj of her trouble and he knitted his brow and determined to help her if he could. First he went and told their mother that Fatma's story must be true because he had seen the wild-looking old Arab coming along the road from Sidi Okba as he was watching the goats graze by the side of the road. When their father came back to supper he repeated the story and offered to go into Biskra early the next morning and find the thief. The father agreed to this, but told him to return as soon as he had found the man and then he would tell him what to do next.

The following day Hadj started soon after sunrise, and an hour later was wandering round all the cafés in the Arab quarter, and keeping a sharp

look out by the Turkish baths and little shops, but nowhere could he find the man. When the market-place was at its busiest, he was pushing his way among the date-merchants and their sticky sacks of fruit, when he caught sight of an Arab surveying the crowd from under his eyelids and leaning his head back against a pillar of the Arcade that shelters the little shops from the full glare of the sun. A streak of light fell on something bright which he held in his hand; Hadj drew near as if to examine the yellow slippers that a cobbler was busily making in his shop under the archway, and saw that the old man was holding out Fatma's brass hand with the intention of selling it. He noticed that the man was half-blinded by his drooping eyelids, and could only see at all when he leaned his head backwards.

At that moment two Roumis drew near and one lady stopped and looked at the little pendant and asked its price. The old Arab hesitated and Hadj thrust his head forward saying in Arabic that it was not right to buy and sell an old Fatma's hand, for bad luck would follow her who bought it. Soon a little crowd collected, ready to enjoy a bargain or listen to a dispute. Some one explained to the lady in French what the boy was saying and she moved on. At first the old man seemed angry, but recovering himself he seized the boy's arm and whispered to him to come into the public gardens as he had something to say to him. When they reached a shady quiet seat by the wall of the

French fort, the old man began the following story:—

"I have been unlucky all my life and although I inherited considerable property, I have gradually come down to the state you now see me in. Two days ago I was nearly starving in the sacred town of Sidi Okba, and weak with hunger and despair, I lay down by the wall of the ancient Mosque that contains the Saint's tomb. While there I fell into a trance and it seemed to me that the friend of the prophet was speaking to me. He told me to go on my way and that guided by a hand, and led by a donkey I should at length come to a mountain where I should find some yellow diamonds! I rose up full of hope and some invisible power guided me on the road to Biskra. With winged feet I flew along the stony track, and it was not until I reached the bare river bed that I met a little girl carrying some dates, and remembered my hunger. I snatched the dates from her and hurried on. To my surprise, I found I had at the same time pulled off her Fatma's hand! I dared not stop, and indeed thus had the first part of the prophecy come true, so I continued my journey, eating the dates as I went. Now I gather that you are the brother of the child and I offer you a share in the profits and the lost hand, if you will help me to discover the yellow diamonds and the donkey which is to lead me to them."

Hadj was much struck with the plan, and he promised the old man that he would return, if

possible, that evening when he had asked his father if he might join the expedition. They arranged to meet again by the Flour Mill to the north of Biskra and within sight of the road to the mountains.

Hadj hurried back to the tent on the edge of the desert, and recounted all the old man had told him. At first his father doubted the wisdom of the undertaking and was about to set off himself for Biskra to force the old man to give up Fathma's hand, when suddenly a donkey's bray from the neighbouring clump of palm trees took them by surprise! On going to see where it came from they found the funniest little brown donkey loose among the trees with some bits of cord round its body; most likely it had started away from a caravan or group of camels and donkeys, when its pack fell off, and in the confusion and excitement of descending to the dry bed of the river no one had noticed the departure of the tiny animal. "What a dear little 'Deb,'" said Fatma. "Why, Hadj, this is just what the old man wants." At this the little fellow pricked up his long ears, raised his big head and sent another mighty bray from his cream-coloured throat! After the donkey had thus spoken, no more objections were made, and the mother busied herself packing up enough *cous-cous* to last several days, besides a goatskin full of milk.

Before sundown all was ready; Hadj bade farewell to his family and set off bravely for the

mountains. This time he did not go through Biskra, but skirting the town followed the river-bed for some way and joined the old man, who was waiting anxiously for him by the flour mill outside the wall of the fort. No one saw them start, as it is a lonely place after sunset, and before it was quite dark they had got well away along the road that leads over a pass towards the Salt Mountain. They slept the first night under a sandy hillock and rose early to continue their journey, passing only one solitary Arab guarding his flock on the hillside, and some crested hoopoo birds playing on the sand banks. Little Deb trotted along cheerfully, carrying the old man on his short strong back. They had no idea of the way, so they just let him lead. He took them across a plain and by the Gazelles' Fountain, until they reached the foot of a steep mountain with red rocks. To their left was the shining Salt Mountain, and on the right the lovely *Jebel A'hmer*, or rosy mountain. Still, the donkey led them on, until they fairly lost themselves among the giants of the range! Weary now and stumbling blindly along in the darkness, they dropped down at last and rested until morning.

Deb utterly refused to move any further, so they set to work to explore the caves and rocks, and a hopeless task it seemed! At last it occurred to Hadj that if he had the lucky hand, it might go better with them, and the old man, grumbling, gave it up. Another day had gone by without bringing

them any nearer to the yellow diamonds, and the provisions were nearly exhausted. That night Hadj slept clasping the lucky hand, and he dreamed a dream.

He thought he was groping his way to the dried-up bed of a mountain torrent until he came to a place where it divided into pipes or channels; he chose one of these and as he went up it there was a sound in his ears like the word *Gabbro!* He began to stumble in the dark and feel with his hands among the rough rocks with which the channel was filled. As he searched he saw something shining with a phosphorous gleam. . . .

Just then he awoke and the sun was peeping over the tops of the mountains. The old man was still asleep, but Deb was looking more alert than he had done for the last two days. He rubbed his nose against Hadj as if he wanted him to move on. Hadj did not stop to eat anything but got up softly and followed Deb who was straining at his cord. Presently they came to the old water channel and here Deb planted his feet and refused to go any further but nibbled at a patch of thistles and paid no more attention to the way.

Hadj thought of his dream and began to look among the rough pebbles and rocks, turning them over patiently with his hands. A sound as of wind came down the channel and it seemed to form the word "*Gabbro,*" repeated over and over again. For nearly an hour Hadj dragged painfully along until his knees were sore and his head

began to swim. Suddenly he came to a little group of crystals of regular shapes, like cubes, among a lot of other pebbles. They varied in colour from red to brown, and some were of a honey-yellow with a strange lustre like rock that had been through the fire. Eagerly he chose out the yellow stones and leaving the others he knotted these in a corner of his *gandora* and hurried back to Deb. The little donkey was not at all inclined to leave his prickly breakfast but Hadj mounted him and turned his reluctant head down the dry bed of the torrent. He began to feel rather faint now and longed for some food himself. When they got back to the old man he showed him the stones, then rolled off the donkey's back on to the ground in a dead faint. The old man looked at him and thought awhile then hastily collected the crystals and prepared to depart having first finished off the rest of the provisions. Deb utterly refused to move, so finding that blows and hard words had no effect the greedy old man hurried off with the stones and was never heard of again!

Hadj came round from his faint and dragging himself into the shadow of a rock slept there for hours. As the afternoon wore on he awoke feeling better and sat up to find that he and Deb were alone and the yellow diamonds gone! "That was a mean trick," he thought, but at any rate he still had Fatma's hand and the donkey. Why should he not return to the rocky channel before it was

dark and perhaps find some more precious stones? Deb was nothing loth to return to his favourite patch of thorns and carried him cheerfully back once more.

It was getting late but Hadj could just see the phosphorous gleam of the crystals among the rocks. He hastily seized the ones he could see best then hurried back to find Deb, for the weird sounds of whistling down the channels and the repeated *Gabbro-o-o-o* made his hair stand on end! What would the rock spirits do if they found out that he was taking their most precious stones? Not daring to look back, he quickly got on Deb and urged him down the water-course, only too thankful when the echoing sounds died away in the distance.

The following evening a weary boy, and a sturdy little donkey with an unusually big head, reached the warm fountain called the Saint's Bath. A young Roumi who had come out there from Biskra, took pity on the boy and gave him a meal of bread and delicious chocolate, made with the good cow's milk for which the place is famous. When he had finished and a little colour had come back into his face, the Roumi asked the boy his story and seemed so kind, that Hadj told him all from the beginning, and showed him the remainder of the stones he had found.

Much interested, the young Roumi examined them carefully and offered the boy a fair sum for the three largest stones. "These are ruby gar-

nets," he said, "and if I mistake not they will have a beautiful soft glow which cannot be imitated! The ancients set great store by these stones. The phosphorous gleam which you saw, came from their being exposed to the hot sun on the open river bed, and they must have been thrown up among the other volcanic rocks. The yellow crystals taken by the old man were not so valuable as these."

Hadj took leave of his friend thanking him for the money, and trotted off on Deb.

When they reached the tent there was great rejoicing among the little family. Fatma was delighted to see Hadj again and to recover her lucky hand! The remaining precious stones were strung on to her mother's necklace, and you may be sure that Deb was well fed that night, and treated far better than most other Arab donkeys for the rest of his days.

When the sunset glow lights up the mountains, Hadj and Fatma look towards the fiery red one, but they never wish to go there again for fear of the geni of the caves, and the warning voices.

VII.

L'Aggra and the Dog.

When L'Aggra came to Biskra from his home in the White Village up by the Giant Gate of the Desert, it was late in the season, and he did not find very much to do. Besides, he had not the smooth manners of Amor, nor the experience of the other guides. He was young, about sixteen, with a hoarse voice, thin supple limbs, sleepy half-shut eyes full of fire, and a wide laughing mouth. It was a pleasure to see him springing into the air after balls or leaping the low earthen walls and singing for very joy of movement!

For a short time he earned a few "sous" while the strange new game of the Roumis was being played on the tennis-court under the wall of the French fort, close to the edge of the Desert. It was pleasant there in the evenings while the sunset glow was on the distant mountains, but soon it grew too hot and the Roumis ceased to play. Then L'Aggra earned no more "sous" and no supper. It was well that there was always a breakfast of bread and coffee kept for him by the Arab boys' friend, but sometimes he was too proud to come for this, and slept away the time under the sunny wall of the Fort. There was another reason, too,

"A Game of Dominoes."

why he did not always like to appear before his friend. One of the temptations of town life had him in its clutches. He did not care to sit and gaze at the dancing-girls in the cafés like Amor and drink strong coffee with the smart Arabs, besides he had not enough money for these pleasures, but he did like to taste *Absinthe*, the yellowy green cordial the French are so fond of. Although it was forbidden drink for Mohammedans, he loved to feel the fire of it through his veins, then sink into happy dreams and forget he was a poor Arab boy.

It hurt him now to think of his free, healthy life near the mountains, yet he longed to go back there. Sometimes, in the interval of the game, he talked of his early days and told how years before when he was watching a herd of goats on the hills, he suddenly felt a sharp prick and sting on the side of his foot. It came from the bite of a purple *naja* or darting viper, and began to swell at once until he could hardly crawl along the rocky path. When near enough he hailed some other Arab boys and they helped him to reach the White Village.

By this time his leg was swelling too, and had turned a strange dark colour. They called the native doctor and he put some ointments on the wound, but still it went on swelling and the pain was acute. L'Aggra was no coward, but he began to think he must go mad with the pain, or die! At last someone suggested that the old remedy

was to kill a dog and dip the poisoned wound in the animal's blood. Immediately a little white dog belonging to L'Aggra's father was fetched, cut open, and the boy's foot held in the warm body until the dreaded fever went down, and the poison left the wound!

L'Aggra recovered, but he never forgot his friend the little white dog whose life had been taken for his. He thought of him even more here in Biskra where he was often lonely and out of spirits. After taking the absinthe he usually awoke feeling very depressed, and life seemed to him a bitter thing. Sometimes he was to be seen in the market place of an evening, the centre of a knot of laughing boys, his turban all undone, his eyes glittering, and talking the most utter nonsense. Then his voice became loud and hoarse, he gambolled about like a dog making short, sharp barking sounds while his companions looked on in surprise! They were not a little disdainful, too, because for an Arab to give way thus is contrary to the laws of their prophet, Mohammed, and shocks their sense of personal dignity.

One evening, L'Aggra was quieter than usual; he had been playing dominoes all the hot afternoon, and now some Roumis noticed the downcast looks of the boy, and invited him to sit at their table outside a café. They offered him a choice of harmless drinks, and he chose water sweetened with fruit syrup, and did not talk and

laugh as much as usual, but sat with drooping limbs and down-cast eyes. Presently, from under the table, appeared a small white dog and it looked up at L'Aggra with bright expectant eyes. He stooped and lifted the little animal up, fondling it in his arms. A warm and friendly feeling came over him, for here was something that seemed to need him, and it reminded him very much of the little white dog of El Kantara.

From that day, L'Aggra was often to be seen with his new friend. He did not drink so much absinthe because of the dog's wistful eyes watching him, besides he now saved some of his "sous" to buy bits of meat for it. Towards sunset he took the dog with him to the top of a ruined fort just outside Biskra. Here they sat together and L'Aggra watched the setting sun as it went down behind the mountains, leaving them all gold, purple and misty blue. The life in the human hive beneath him seemed so far away, he forgot for a time the little meannesses and jealousies, the hot anger and disappointment while he watched the strings of patient camels coming in from the desert, and gazed along the winding track to Timbuctoo, until it was lost in the boundless desert.

There was something strange and inspiring in the thought of what lay beyond the track. What weeks and months of hardship and danger, before a caravan could safely cross that great ocean of sand! Bones whiten the sides of the road and

are the only sign posts, yet men still go forward, and L'Aggra's eyes glistened at the thought of wild adventure, and of things strange and new which lay hidden to the south of that blue horizon line.

He thought, too, of the Roumis, the Christian strangers, who had come over the mountains from the North, making roads and bridges like the Romans of old, but the desert they could not conquer. They knew how to sink deep wells and get water for the thirsty villages, and on the whole they were kind and just. Their women walked about freely, and had eyes that were not afraid.

As the shades of night fell, L'Aggra and the dog wandered back to the Market-place, now lit up with many little charcoal cooking stoves. The soups and *cous-cous* were being prepared, and tasty-looking morsels of meat roasted on long spits over the clear flame, while rich fries were laid out on trays to tempt the passers-by. They wandered round smelling the good things, but not often tasting them, for lack of money! Very often L'Aggra had to content himself with a handful of dried nuts, or a sip from some generous Arab's soup-ladle.

The dancing soon began in the cafés, but the boy amused himself by gazing at the life outside. He scanned the groups of lazy fine-limbed Arabs, crouching or lying on the mats by the café doors, hardly taking the trouble to keep their cigarettes alight, or lift a lazy eyelid to look at the passers by, yet few things escaping their

notice. Others paced slowly up and down, their white cloaks swinging from their shoulders in graceful folds, while the brilliant Biskra moonlight and the glittering stars cast a strange glamour over all.

L'Aggra lingered for some time at one window for it belonged to the café, where the "Arabian Nights Tales" were read aloud by a thin hawk-nosed man, seated cross-legged on a little dais. Crowds of white-robed Arabs crouched on the floor all round him, listening eagerly to the old fairy tales! The reader had an oil-dip by his side and grew very excited waving a long thin arm and claw-like hand. Presently, L'Aggra tired of listening and moved on to the gardens, which were like fairy-land in the bright moonlight, and where the great stars shone like jewels through the trellis-work of over-hanging trees. Suddenly there was a sound of light music and a group of tiny Arabs clad all in white flitted by with coloured paper lanterns swinging from their hands, and from poles across their shoulders. They carried white banners on which were written in quaint characters where the fêtes were to be held that night. No sooner had their tinkling music and coloured lights sped away up the green alley, when the most unearthly sounds came from a neighbouring street, and soon "le lion" was seen approaching in the midst of a little crowd. The lion is a weird monster made up of two men with draperies over them! They stop from time to time and go through a sort of

pantomime with fearful cries, and sounds of drums and cymbals.

Weary at last, L'Aggra sank down to sleep. Sometimes he found a bare wooden bench in some Arab café, or sheltered with a friend, but that night he lay on the ground and dreamed that the old Sand-diviner in the Market-place had told him he would one day discover a hidden treasure, whereupon he bought a soft warm Burnous, most excellent to sleep in . . .

Very soon the great Spring Races at the beautiful little oasis of Beni Mora would take place, and then he meant to go back to his native village, and his widowed mother. . . .

When the day of the *Fantasia* came, L'Aggra was in luck's way, for a Roumi gave him a ticket so that he might stand inside the rope that encircled the course. Though he did not know it, the white dog had followed him out from Biskra, lost sight of him in the crowd, and now wandered about forlorn among the mimosa trees of the oasis.

L'Aggra watched the Mozabite tribe performing their strange dance between the races; they sprang into the air with sharp cries, and fired wildly into the earth beneath them until they were enveloped in a cloud of dust and smoke and powder-flashes. Then the Arab chiefs came by with their falcons for chasing the hare, and afterwards the noble racing camels at a swinging trot. Last of all came the headlong gallop of the *Goums* —chiefs of many an oasis village. Superb were

the men, and superb the horses, with their richly-coloured trappings and saddles,—a *fantasia* indeed, worthy of the land of daring and romance! Some carried their sabres between their teeth and fired to right and left as they flew past, the reins falling loose on their horses' necks. Each *Goum* was distinct in his gorgeous colours, some in scarlet or white, others in blue, maroon or crimson; under their green banner they came, proud, handsome, fierce and silent.

L'Aggra was fascinated by the brave sight, his eyes glittered, and sometimes a low, hoarse sound burst from his throat in answer to the battle-cries of the chiefs. He pressed into the front row of onlookers, careless of the dust and stones from the flying horses' hoofs. Group after group swept by and the grand finale was preparing: in this the Prince of the villages was to be the central figure and gallop by holding a drawn sword across another chief's throat, while the foot of each pressed his friend's stirrup,—a wonderful display of horsemanship!

At that moment L'Aggra saw the little white dog coming towards him from the other side of the course. He tried to wave it back, but the dog had seen him, and stunned by the noise and confused by the crowd it only looked at its friend and came calmly on! L'Aggra felt desperate, the *Goums* were just starting on their last gallop; he could hear the thunder of their hoofs! He stooped under the rope and darted forward to try and save

his little friend. Too late to stop him, too late to retire, L'Aggra could only seize the dog in his arms and crouch down in the earth! A cloud of horsemen covered them from sight, a cloud of dust followed, and as it rolled slowly away, a huddled heap lay in the torn-up ground. . . . It was L'Aggra and the dog, both untouched by the noble horses that never tread on a man if they can possibly help it, but spring lightly over him in their stride! Except for a bruise or two from flying stones they were quite unharmed, and joyfully L'Aggra found his way back from Beni Mora with the dog trotting beside him.

He, too, had joined in the *fantasia* that day, felt what it was to look death in the face, and know that there was Something stronger. They turned their faces now to the mountains, but one day the desert will draw them back again, for they are its children.

Children of the sand that no man can conquer,
*Freely they wander as the wind that makes it;**
Spirits of the Sunshine that lives for ever,
Allah for His purpose is making them strive.

* The desert sand is said to be made by the action of the wind.

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